

Second Presbyterian Church  
(Claiborn Temple)  
Hernando Street and Pontatoc Avenue  
Memphis  
Shelby County  
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-186

HABS  
TENN  
79-MEMPH  
11-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
(Claiborn Temple)

HABS No. TN-186

Location: Hernando Street and Pontatoc Avenue, Memphis, Shelby  
County, Tennessee.  
Latitude: 35° 08' 11.5" Longitude: 90° 03' 04"

Present Owner  
and Occupant: African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Significance: Constructed as the Second Presbyterian Church in 1891,  
this Gothic Church is most famous under the name Claiborn  
Temple when it served as the center for the great civil  
rights movement of the 1960s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Contract with architects, March 30, 1890.  
Contract for building awarded on November 1890 to L. C. Bisbee and  
Sons, Minneapolis, for \$80,000. Ground broken February 2, 1891.  
Cornerstone laid May 14, 1891. Services in new lecture room March  
7, 1892. Services in new sanctuary October 16, 1892. Formal  
dedication service January 1, 1893.
2. Architects: The design of this church resulted from an advertised  
competition for which over fifty plans were submitted (none have  
survived). The winning firm was that of Frederick Kees and  
Franklin B. Long of Minneapolis. A Memphis architect who was a  
member of the Second Presbyterian Church (and of its building  
committee), Edward Culliatt Jones, was an associate on this  
project and has been generally cited as its designer.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following chain of title may  
be established from the Register of Deeds of Shelby County.  
  
1890 Deed July 1, 1890, recorded July 1, 1890 in  
Book 214 page 145 (\$7000.00)  
William Moore, Kate E. Moore (wife) and S. W. Logwood  
to  
Second Presbyterian Church (trustees)  
  
1949 Deed December 1, 1949, recorded December 5, 1949 in  
Book 2468 page 323  
Second Presbyterian Church (corporation)  
to  
Claiborn Temple, African Methodist Episcopal Church  
(trustees)

4. Alterations and additions: The steeple, which rose 215 feet above the pavement, was dismantled at some time between 1908 and 1930 because its slate shingles were beginning to fall and it was considered a hazard to pedestrians.

(Other changes have not been recorded).

- B. Historical Context: As the Second Presbyterian Church this edifice was often the scene of important ecclesiastical events, and the platform for noted preachers. When erected it was the largest church building south of the Ohio River. Minutes of the session preserved little information about the building; these matters were delegated to a building committee whose records were later destroyed. Due to the size and affluence of the congregation, its activities were newsworthy; most of the details about the architecture and construction dates were found in the contemporary press.

As Claiborn Temple the building has been important in the Negro community in Memphis and the southeast generally. Most notably, it was the starting point for a number of the civil rights demonstrations and marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the 1960s.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: An American church with a typical design that continued to be employed in ecclesiastical structures until the middle part of the 20th century.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair. The building is suffering from insufficient funds for adequate maintenance and shows signs of deterioration, primarily in the roof. Windows have been broken. The building appears to be structurally sound.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 150' square (unmeasured); plan is essentially square with a tower at the southwest corner. The projections make the building appear cruciform in plan and this is reinforced with the roof forms.
2. Walls: The building is constructed of granite stone. The ashlar blocks are of various sizes but regular in shape. They have rough faces.
3. Structural system, framing: The roof is of timber, unexposed within. (The overall structural system was not recorded at the time of this survey).

4. Porches: A covered stone porch with an arched opening is on the south side of the building. It gives access between the church proper and the classroom wing to the east. At the entrance doors there are low porches up to the floor level.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The double entrance doors on each side of the tower have beveled leaded glass panels over two wood panels. They are topped with transoms which have three quadrefoil windows of colored glass. The second entrance doorways at the northwest corner are similar.
  - b. Windows: The major window on the west (front) facade has five lancet windows of colored glass set within a slightly pointed arch. On the north and south facades the large pointed arch openings have colored glass panels. Numerous double-hung windows of various sizes on the south elevation have colored glass.
6. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: The cruciform roof has gables extending to the south, north and west. They have tile roofs.

To the right of the covered porch on the south elevation is a "tower" with a roof that matches its configuration (see HABS photo No. TN-186-5).
  - b. Tower: The building is dominated by a granite tower at the southwest corner. It has five levels with vertical slotted openings. The tower is buttressed.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The church proper has a single auditorium space within. The configuration is a complete surprise after viewing the exterior. While one expects a cruciform plan, the room is wide open and the arrangement radiates from the chancel at the northeast corner. The seats fan out, oriented toward that corner. A balcony encircles the vast room from midway along the north wall, across the west and south walls, to midway along the east wall. It terraces down to the chancel.

There are a series of rooms to the east of the auditorium. They include a new sanctuary, dining room and meeting rooms which were apparently converted from the old classroom wing of the church. A former library is just east of the auditorium and serves as a lobby.

2. Stairways: At the rear of the auditorium, stairs on the west and south walls give access to the balcony. There are twenty one risers and the stairways have elaborate newels and balusters of oak. There are stairways from the lobby to the east into the auditorium.
3. Flooring: The auditorium floor which slopes down from the southwest to northeast has oak floor boards. The lobby has tile floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Lath and plaster. The four walls of the auditorium have large arched recesses. There is a 4' high oak wainscot in the auditorium. The ceiling of the auditorium is scalloped with a dome in the center. A large chandelier is suspended from the dome. Vestibules have coffered ceilings. Some of the meeting rooms have coved ceilings and cornice moldings.
5. Decorative features and trim: The auditorium abounds with richness of material with its use of oak. There are oak wainscot, pews with carved ends, stairways, balcony and wall features. The balcony is supported with cast-iron columns which have foliated capitals. The chancel arch has gold leaf brackets and decoration. The massive organ pipes are set in a recess in the east wall, behind the archway. The ceiling dominates the interior with its dome and chandelier. The stained glass is of exceptional quality in color and composition.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church is located on the northeast corner of Hernando Street and Pontatoc Avenue and its tower is located at the corner corresponding to the intersection. The neighborhood is mixed residential and industrial and areas have been cleared for urban renewal.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views: There is a detailed cut of the church building, showing the original steeple and varying only in minor details from what was actually built, on the printed program of the dedication service. This cut was photocopied for this survey.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Property records. Register of Deeds, Shelby County. (No address given).

Goeldner, Paul. Doctorial dissertation includes a section on Kees and Long, the Memphis architects who designed this church. (Mr. Goeldner is an architect with the U.S. Department of the Interior)

2. Secondary and published sources:

Gillespie, Charles C. A History of the Second Presbyterian Church of Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis: Second Presbyterian Press, 1971, pp. 27-41 et passim.

Newspaper articles:

"Church Dedication," Memphis Public Ledger (January 2, 1893).

"Dedication of a Grand Church," Memphis Appeal-Avalanche (January 1, 1893).

Prepared by: Richard H. Hulan  
HABS Historian  
HABS West Tennessee Project  
Summer 1972

Robert C. Giebner  
HABS Project Supervisor  
HABS West Tennessee Project  
Summer 1972

Edited by: Susan McCown  
HABS Historian  
Spring 1985

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1972 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the West Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, and Richard H. Hulan, project historian (Nashville).

Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer, took the photographs of the building in 1974.

The written data was edited in the Spring of 1985 by Susan McCown, HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, for transmittal to the Library of Congress.